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ABSTRACT

Single mothers on welfare were recruited for a program at Trinity College of Vermont using a variety of methods: newspaper advertisements, admission office applicants, and welfare office solicitation. Eligible for the program were single mothers on welfare meeting all Trinity College entrance requirements and having an interest in and commitment to public service. Twelve were selected and admitted in the fall of 1989. Through both public and private funds, students were provided with full day care, transportation assistance, books and supplies, and living expenses. A skilled academic advisor was assigned to assist them in making the transition to college. In return, students were expected to volunteer for 8-10 hours of community service in a setting of their choice, for which they would receive an additional stipend. A battery of tests was given to the women to determine their motivation, personality, attitude, and cognitive styles, and a life history narrative was obtained from each woman. The motivational profile showed high striving for achievement coupled with fear of failure, feelings of sorrow over separation and loss, and a strong sense of social power. Emerging high self-esteem and high sense of control over one's destiny were also indicated. A longitudinal study will be conducted to follow these women through their college experiences. (KC)

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Breaking the bonds of poverty: a motivational profile of selected welfare single mothers entering college.

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Abstract: A motivational profile of a sample of adult women learners on welfare was obtained which showed high strivings for achievement coupled with fear of failure, concerns for world blocks, feelings of sorrow over separation and loss, but a strong sense of social power. Emerging high self esteem and high sense of control over one's destiny were also indicated. Implications for adult educators are discussed.

Introduction:

The feminization of poverty as portrayed by the single mother raising her family on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) has become a pressing concern (Shaffer, 1988; Sands & Nuccio, 1989). In recent years several welfare reform initiatives have been attempted. For example, efforts have been made to include employment ("workfare") as a condition of welfare. This program has been severely criticized for its failure to address the underlying needs of this population (Miller, 1989) who seem to be caught in a double bind; if they work, they labor for inadequate wages; if they seek welfare they are stigmatized and penalized with inadequate financial support (Grella,1989). Other programs have been developed to link training and education in an attempt to prepare them for economic independence. However, such programs have had limited success (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

The many problems associated with these efforts are been both structural and personal: lack of adequate child care, for one; and the lack of understanding of motivational presses on the part of the individual recipient for another. In fact, much of the research in this area has been of aggregate, quantitative nature. Little attention has been paid to listening to "women's voices" and to understanding the problem from the eyes of the individual woman who may be trying to make sense of her world from a somewhat different perspective (Gilligan, 1982; Belencky, Clinchy, Goldberger& Tarule,1987; Miller, 1989).

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Only recently have efforts been made to offer for these women participation in higher education as an intervention strategy . Fortunately, recent welfare reform (the Welfare Reform Act of 1989) has encouraged collaboration with higher education in providing training and education for welfare mothers. But, what do we know of these women in terms of their needs, their strengths, their weaknesses? How can we adapt our programs to serve this rapidly expanding group?

The present study is based on one such program (Chesbrough, 1989) in which both private and public funds are pooled to provide an opportunity for a selected group of welfare mothers to pursue a degree in higher education. An important element of this program is provision for day care, which can be seen as essential to the success of such programs. Questions can now be raised about these women. What are their motivational profiles? Are their developmental paths similar/different from successful women leaders who have achieved (Cheng, 1988)? If so, in what way? What are their perceptions of self, of challenges, or support? How do they view the role of higher education in searching for the road upward? In other words, what can they tell us of their struggles to survive and to overcome? How can their stories help practioners to better serve this often underserved population? These and other questions are being addressed. A longitudinal study of a selected group of welfare women pursuing a college degree is in process. Present paper will present certain baseline data, focusing on motivational aspects.

Method:

Subjects:

Subjects were recruited via a variety of sources: newspaper ads, admission office applicant, welfare office solicitation. Criteria for admission included: single mother on welfare meeting all Trinity College entrance requirements (high school diploma, or equivalent, evidence of academic potential, strength of character, maturity, motivation, and promise for continued personal growth and development as stated in p. 2, Trinity College catalog). In addition they were expected to demonstrate interest in and commitment to public service. Previous college experience was acceptable and evaluated in the admission process. Twelve subjects were selected and admitted in the fall of 1989.

Intervention:

Through both public and private funds, students were provided with full child day care, transportation assistance, books and supplies, as well as living expenses. A skilled academic advisor was assigned to assist them in making the transition to college. In return, students were expected to volunteer for 8-10 hours of community service in a setting of their choice. For this experience they would receive an additional stipend.

Instruments:

A battery of tests was given including motivational, personality, attitudinal, and cognitive styles such as Loevinger Sentence Completion Test (Loevinger, 1970); Thematic Apperception Test (McClelland, 1973); Internal Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1965); Thinking Style Inventory (Harrison &Bransom, 1988), and Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Patterned after a study of women leaders (Cheng, 1988) a life history narrative was obtained in which women were asked to tell in their own words how they came to be where they are today, what barriers they encountered and how they overcame them.

Procedures:

Testing was done in a group setting during orientation and before the start of classes. Later, individual interviews of one and one-half hour's duration were held. These were taped. The present paper focuses on selected motivational themes.

Results:

Biographical information.

The students ranged in age from 25-44, with an average age of approximately 34. All were receiving public assistance and all had dependent children at home, ranging in age from toddlers to adolescence. Parental socio-economic background was likely to be blue collar. Without exception family background included a history of abuse, including alcohol, drug and/or sexual abuse.

Many of the women had dropped out of high school, later obtaining a GED. Several came to Trinity from other college experiences including community college and adult education programs. As expected from the criteria for selection the sample has a strong history of volunteer work in a variety of settings: church, school, working for handicapped, holding office in tenant's association, legal aide assistant, rape counseling center, etc. These efforts gave the women a sense of control and power over their situation. They know how to make the system work for them, then used this power to help others.

Support systems noted included the encouragement provided by adult educators in community college settings, social workers in programs such as Reach -Up, occasionally a welfare worker, and less often (but important) a family member, particularly a mother or grandmother.

Content analysis of TATs was done using an adaptation of McClelland's scoring system. Motivational profiles for the sample showed high strivings for achievement, but with considerable fear of failure themes and conflicts centering around world blocks. Less often voiced was a personal block. Affiliation themes of separation, sorrow, loss were predominant. Power concerns were primarily expressed in terms of social power, the concern for the empowerment of others.

The women also were high in internal locus of control (mean of 7.9), with remarkably high self esteem (mean of 28.42), considering their past experiences and the challenge of a new situation. They appreciated cognitive complexity with the majority showing an Idealist thinking style. Not surprisingly, they indicated androgynous sex role stereotyping. The profile that emerged is one of a woman with a strong sense of self and purpose, with high achievement strivings coupled with anxiety over performance and feelings of loss through separation. High power motives, especially social power, were seen in the TAT as well as in the life story.

The narrative life story confirmed these motivational profiles as these women spoke again and again of their strong strivings to overcome their past and to adapt to change. They had experienced barriers, they were realists, but they also were finding within themselves the courage to change. They expressed over and again strong beliefs in their ability to effect change and to empower others. The volunteer efforts were

expressed as important, even in some cases essential to their sense of purpose and well-being.

Implications:

This research may have implications and further insights for the practitioner working with high risk groups. Growth is a process of adaptation, of separating from the past in order to connect to the future. As we learn to listen to women's voices and to understand the motivational strivings of underserved populations we may be able to assist in this transformation. We need to be aware ofour diverse student body, especially of the needs of the underclass. We need to recognize their intense needs for challenge, for achievement, but also to understand that the fear of failure may be very real for them. They are survivors in an often inhospitable landscape; we need to recognize those skills and abilities they have developed out of their adversity. We need to to encourage them, support them, challenge them, yes, but we also need to know that they have unusual strengths.

Furthermore, as we follow these women through their college experience they may be able to tell us in very eloquent ways the transforming power of education, particularly the role of volunteerism in promoting concerns of social power. For, although their developmental paths are very disparate from the women leaders previously researched (Cheng, 1988), common themes of concern for others and the expression of social power were heard in these women's life narrative, suggesting that connectedness to others may be similar for women and that we need to provide opportunities to utilize these motivational strivings.

The single mother on welfare represents one of our greatest challenges. We need to know what programs are most effective and in order to do so we need to listen to these women as they tell us who they are, what their concerns are, what their strengths are, thereby facilitating their growth.

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